

# Movement to restore indigenous knowledge in policy and practice

How can tacit knowledge unique to a certain culture and not described in academic books – termed indigenous knowledge – be brought onto an equal footing with current dominant Westernised systems of knowledge? And how can ‘cognitive justice’ and ‘restorative action’ be brought to bear on policymaking in the public sphere? *Ina van der Linde* highlights aspects of this fundamental shift in thinking about development.



*Professors Shiv Visvanathan and Odora Hoppers.*



*Professor Babuuzibwa Mukase Luutu.*

To transform the education system ‘we have to rethink thinking itself’, says Professor Odora Hoppers, South African Research Chair (SACi) in Development Education at the University of South Africa and UNESCO education expert. ‘Indigenous knowledge has to be included in the dialogues of knowledge without having to fit into the structures and standards of Western knowledge. We are changing the rules of the game,’ says Hoppers.

She was the driving force behind a seminar on *Bringing cognitive justice and restorative action into public policy making* that took place in Pretoria on 29 November 2015. The seminar was the eighth of its kind to be hosted to date.

Hoppers has called together a group of community elders and indigenous knowledge systems (IKS) practitioners; the

international IKS Advisory Faculty; postgraduate students; vice-chancellors of different universities and 40 professors from all over the world to think deeply about how IKS can be brought into various disciplines, from quantum physics, law, economics and science to theoretical physics.

The first challenge is where to start when thinking about rethinking the rules of the game. At the beginning, says Indian scholar, Shiv Visvanathan, who coined the term ‘cognitive justice’.

‘The concept of cognitive justice is based on the recognition that there are various knowledges, equally valid,’ he explains. ‘The dominating Western science has had a destructive impact on developing countries and non-Western cultures, and there should be recognition of alternative sciences or non-Western forms of knowledge.’

*Indigenous knowledge (IK) describes the local knowledge that is unique to a given culture or society. IK contrasts with the international knowledge system generated by universities, research institutions and private firms. It is the basis for local-level decision-making in agriculture, healthcare, food preparation, education, natural resource management, and a host of other activities in rural communities. (Warren 1991)*



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### **Tapping into living traditions**

Different knowledges are connected to different livelihoods and lifestyles and should therefore be treated equally, says Visvanathan. These are often not in books but in people's

cultural traditions, experiences and memories. The term 'tacit knowledge' comes to mind: knowledge people have without realising they have it.

To illustrate the point, Visvanathan relates an observation by art historian Ananda Coomaraswamy, who argued against the spread of using red synthetic dye for making Indian pots. Coomaraswamy said the organic red dye used for pot-making was a different kind of red from the English red.

'English red walks in uniform. Our red dances to the visions of a different hue, as each village produced its own dialect of red, which synthetic chemistry could destroy. It is a sense of the varieties of colour as a diversity of traditions. Here, craft is a process that keeps that diversity alive by keeping the traditions of redness.'

## Traditions lying in the past are not forgotten but are indeed living traditions

But restorative action is not an attempt to retrieve culture, or a nostalgia to go back to traditions that have been overcome by modernity associated with the Western cultural model; with primitivism and close-mindedness. 'No,' says Professor Babuuzibwa Mukase Luutu, vice-chancellor at the Marcus Garvey Pan-African University and executive director of the Marcus Garvey Pan-African Research Institute in Uganda, 'we are far from that'.

Those traditions lying in the past are not forgotten but are indeed living traditions.

'Those of us who have been formed by Western culture traditions, every time we are in trouble as individuals, as families, as institutions, as states, that's when we proclaim from the rooftops something about African culture. We remember it at that moment. So it means there is a template somewhere, but we use it very instrumentally, very manipulatively, and sometimes to very devastating effect,' says Luutu.

## Restorative action is not leaping out of modernity to something we left long ago

'We need to be very clear,' Luutu adds, 'restorative action is not leaping out of modernity to something we left long ago. It is to come to terms with our hearts, with our personalities. There is a reason why some of us keep that template hidden. It doesn't open many doors in our careers. It doesn't bring the kind of middle class respectability that so many of us crave.'

As HSRC CEO, Professor Crain Soudien, puts it: 'Restorative transformation it is not just about inclusion, or a multicultural game of assimilation. It is about empowerment and requires a kind of participation that restores the full dignity of groups excluded from the dialogue in the past.'

But the big question, asks Soudien, is how to facilitate dialogue? 'It is a perplexing question because the knowledge forms that have shaped me are characterised by particular procedures, which assume that there is a right way to come to an understanding of what truth is all about. And that procedure, which very many enlightenment scientists say is the gift that we are making in the world, is a powerful procedure for coming to understand what a fact is, and the power of fact.'

This knowledge form is intolerant, says Soudien. It is unable to shift gears and engage with other claims for truth making. He links the recent 'fees must fall' student uprising to the current debate, saying that in some way this is what students are asking for, namely a dialogue and engagement, which this forum can provide.

### Understanding the true worth of restorative justice

The follow-up question then is how to take the dialogue further into the venerated chambers of policymakers?

Says Luutu, the South African government has committed certain resources to restorative justice and had a degree of success, but restorative action is narrowly understood in terms of affirmative action.

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## The restoration that we are talking about is restoring a relationship that has been severed over a long period of time; our relationship to nature, relationships among ourselves, through institutions, families, clans and generations

So, what is the way out of this? 'If we looked very closely at those sites of resistance,' says Luutu, 'there is the possibility that the sites of struggle [protests, resistance, e.g. the student uprising] provide very useful knowledge and understanding. The task of the policymaker should be to bring this knowledge, particularly the indigenous knowledge, into the dialogue. In my experience, the first act is one of intellectual humility, admitting that there are people out there with knowledge that can complement what policymakers are doing.'

The last word goes to Hoppers: 'Leaving the academy and entering into the policymaking realm is a risky thing, but we cannot help it, as we are all travelling in the same leaking boat.' ■

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*Also see the next article on policy initiatives on IKS on pages 18 and 19.*

*This article is based on a joint seminar or 'retreat' titled Bringing cognitive justice and restorative action into public policymaking, furthering an agreement between the Department of Science and Technology (DST), the HSRC and the South African Research Chair Initiative (SARChI) in Development Education at the University of South Africa. The purpose of the agreement is to upscale these discussions from an inter-institutional level to a national platform.*

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*For further reading: NRF Indigenous Knowledge Systems Knowledge Fields Development (Kfd) Framework Document – <http://tinyurl.com/zqej7u3go>*